Paul, Moses, and the New Covenant in 2 Corinthians 3

— John de Hoog —

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Paul’s 2 Corinthians is the most personal and autobiographical of his letters. One of his primary aims is the vindication of his ministry, authority and character.\(^1\) In keeping with this purpose, the letter contains a significant number of self-designations in which Paul refers to himself and his ministry. These include\(^2\) ἀπόστολος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ (“apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” 1:1), συνεργοὶ τῆς χαρᾶς ὑμῶν (“fellow workers for your joy” 1:24), διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης (“ministers of a new covenant” 3:6), δούλους ὑμῶν διὰ Ἰησοῦν (“your servants for the sake of Jesus”), ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ πρεσβεύομεν (“ambassadors for Christ” 5:20), ἰδάκονοι (“ministers of God” 6:4) and οἱ γονεῖς (5:12 – Paul describes himself as a “parent” of the Corinthians, cf. 11:2 where he pictures himself as the father of the bride;\(^3\) cf. also 1 Corinthians 4:15). The epistle contains many other references to Paul’s image of himself in relation to the Corinthians.\(^4\)

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1 Commentators are largely united in this assessment, from e.g. Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1915), xli. to e.g. David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians (New Americal Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 26.

2 Some are “I, me” references, some are “we, us” references, but all refer at least to Paul.


Paul defends his ministry as an apostle to the Corinthians against the attack that the “super-apostles” have mounted against it. This defense occupies much of 2:14-7:16 and 10:1-13:10, and Paul’s designation of himself as a “minister of the new covenant” is central to this defense. His argument finds its theological heart in 2:14-3:18. This paper will focus on that section of 2 Corinthians, looking in particular at how Paul interacts with the text of Exodus 34:29-35.

I will begin by surveying Paul’s defense of his new covenant ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18. The analysis will particularly focus on the comparisons and contrasts Paul makes between the old covenant and the ministry of the new covenant. I will then further distil the investigation by considering those aspects of Paul’s defence that relate to the account of Moses’ shining face in Exodus 34. The purpose will be to ask some questions about what Moses actually experienced and to explore whether our analysis has implications for the way we read the Old Testament.

1. Paul’s Defence of His New Covenant Ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18

Paul is sufficient for a ministry that leads to life or to death because, as a minister of the new covenant, God has made him sufficient (2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6)

Paul begins his defence of his ministry by showing in 2:14-3:6 that God has made him adequate as a minister of the new covenant. This unit is framed by a life and death antithesis. The antithesis appears in 2:16 in between the expressions ὀσμὴ ἐκ θανάτου εἰς θανάτον (“aroma from death to death”) and ὀσμὴ ἐκ ζωῆς εἰς ζωήν (“aroma from life to life”). In 3:6 another life and death antithesis is expressed in the words τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτέννει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ (“for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”). The unit is also framed by the question of Paul’s sufficiency. In 2:16 he asks who is sufficient for

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5 See the canvassing of the issues with regard to identifying Paul’s opponents in Paul W. Barnett, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 142-142.


7 Garland, 2 Corinthians, 138.
these things, and in 3:5-6 he declares the source of his sufficiency — his sufficiency is from God. In keeping with these framing motifs, in this section Paul is concerned with demonstrating that he is sufficient for such a life and death ministry because God has made him sufficient.

Paul introduces his defence of his apostolic ministry by picturing himself as being “always led in triumph in Christ” (2:14). There are many views of the meaning of this metaphor,⁸ but it includes at least the triumph of God over Paul (and probably also God’s triumph through Paul as God makes a life or death difference in the lives of others through Paul’s new covenant ministry) and the suffering that is entailed for Paul in being so led. Hafemann’s conclusion, that the metaphor represents Paul “as the captive slave of God who is constantly being led to death,”⁹ is supported by Paul’s later expression of a life-death antithesis in his own experience in 4:10-11. Paul is “always” (πάντοτε) being led in triumph in Christ (2:14) just as he is “always” (πάντοτε) carrying around in his body the dying of Jesus (4:10) and is “always” (αἰεί) being given over to death for Jesus’ sake (4:11). The purpose in 4:10-11 of being given over to death is so that that the life of Jesus might be manifested in him. So Paul’s life or death ministry in the lives of others as depicted in 2:14-16a has its counterpart in Paul himself, in that the life of Jesus is only manifested in him as he carries around the dying of Jesus.¹⁰

Paul goes on in 2:16b to ask the question καὶ πρός ταῦτα τίς ἴκανός; (“and who is sufficient for these things?”). It may be correct to regard this question as implying a direct rhetorical challenge to the Corinthians to assess their own response to Paul’s ministry. Paul has asserted that his ministry is a life or death ministry. So will the Corinthians live or die? Their response to Paul will

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⁸ See the canvassing of some of the possibilities in Barnett, 2 Corinthians, 148-149.
¹⁰ It is worth noting at this point that Paul uses the life-death antithesis in three different ways in the passages I have touched on so far. In 2:16 the life-death antithesis concerns the two possible reactions to what Paul is unfolding as his new covenant ministry. In 3:6 the antithesis is applied to the difference between the old covenant and the new. In 4:10-11 Paul uses it to describe the nature of his new covenant ministry as a ministry which proclaims the message of both the death of Jesus and the life of Jesus at the same time. His new covenant ministry revolves around the message of Jesus crucified in weakness but raised by God’s power. All in all, Paul uses the metaphor to describe the nature of his ministry, how various classes of people react to his ministry, and how his new covenant ministry is different to the ministry of the old covenant.
provide the answer. What kind of servant of Christ would be sufficient for such a ministry? Do the Corinthians consider Paul to be sufficient in comparison to the “super-apostles” of 11:5? If it is true that the question of 2:16b implies such a polemical element over against Paul’s opponents, then Paul has introduced his new covenant ministry by challenging the Corinthians to consider what kind of minister would be sufficient for such a ministry: one like Paul or one like Paul’s opponents? Then in 2:17 Paul immediately initiates his challenge to his opponents by introducing a contrast between his ministry and theirs. So he sets the scene for his defence.

The next section (3:1-6) is designed particularly to establish Paul’s sufficiency as an apostle. His main point is that he has been made sufficient as a διακόνος καινῆς διαθήκης (“minister of a new covenant” 3:6). This covenant is a covenant in which the Spirit changes people, indeed, the Spirit “makes alive” (ζωοποιεῖν, v 6). The Corinthians themselves are evidence that Paul is a minister of this new covenant, because they have been made alive by the work of the Holy Spirit. So Paul does not need “letters of recommendation” (v 1) as some do (another jibe at his opponents), for the Corinthians themselves are ἑπιστολὴ Χριστοῦ διακονηθεῖσα υφ’ ἡμῶν (“an epistle of Christ ministered by us” v 3). The Corinthians themselves are “incontrovertible evidence”11 of Paul’s sufficiency. It is clear that the new covenant, though not explicitly mentioned until 3:6, is already in mind in v 3.12 Since the Corinthians have the characteristics of new covenant people, and since they are an “epistle of Christ” that has been “ministered” by Paul, so Paul’s ministry is a new covenant ministry. This ministry is a ministry of sincerity (2:17), confidence (3:4), glory (3:8-11) and great boldness of speech (3:12).13 Paul’s sufficiency for this ministry comes not from himself but entirely from God (3:5), so his confidence is entirely διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (“through Christ” 3:4).

To summarise, in this section of his argument, Paul introduces his defence by challenging the Corinthians to begin to evaluate their own attitude towards his ministry, for it is a matter of life and death. If they were to reject Paul and embrace his opponents, they would be ignoring the fact of the new covenant

11 Hafemann, Suffering and Ministry, 227.
13 Wright, Climax of the Covenant, 176.
life that is theirs by the work of the Spirit through the ministry of Paul. What criteria are they going to use to assess who is sufficient for such a ministry? They must use correct criteria, not the criteria connected with the “over-realised glory” of his opponents. Paul will go on to prove that the new covenant ministry is superior to the old covenant ministry (3:7-18), so defending his ministry and giving the Corinthians grounds to embrace it and to be reconciled to Paul.

Paul’s new covenant ministry is superior to the ministry of the old covenant because of the different nature of the two covenants, and because of the contrast between the two “audiences” of the two covenants. (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

Paul continues his argument by contrasting his new covenant ministry with the ministry of the old covenant. As already noted, the contrast has already informed some of Paul’s argument so far, but now it becomes his focus. The apostle draws the following contrasts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old covenant ministry</th>
<th>2 Cor</th>
<th>New covenant ministry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written on tablets of stone (πλαξὶν λιθίναις)</td>
<td>3:3</td>
<td>Written with the Spirit of the living God, written on tablets of human hearts (πλαξὶν καρδίαις σαρκίναις), a letter from Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the letter, that kills (ἀποκτείνω)</td>
<td>3:6</td>
<td>Of the Spirit, who gives life (ζωοποιέω)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of death (διακονία τοῦ θανάτου), engraved in letters on stone</td>
<td>3:7-8</td>
<td>Ministry of the Spirit (διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of condemnation (διακονία τῆς κατακρίσεως)</td>
<td>3:9</td>
<td>Ministry of righteousness (διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was fading away (καταργέω)</td>
<td>3:11</td>
<td>That which lasts (μένω)</td>
</tr>
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Paul’s argument is of the *a fortiori* style which depends not on denigrating the old covenant but on showing the superiority of the new.\(^\text{15}\) The first step of the argument in this section depends on showing how the ministry of the old covenant could be both glorious and a ministry that brought death. Hafemann has taken Exodus 32-34 as the backdrop for Paul’s argument here.\(^\text{16}\) He argues that Moses’ ministry was *glorious* because he mediated the glory of God, as shown by his shining face, but that it was a *ministry of death* because the glory of God, if fully manifested, would have destroyed the people of Israel in their state of rebellion, as symbolised by the need for Moses to veil his face.\(^\text{17}\) In this way, according to Hafemann, Paul both upholds the glory of Moses and explains the failure of the old covenant ministry in terms of the failure of the people. Hafemann suggests that this approach is an explanation that Jewish interpreters would have recognised as being consistent with “a long line of canonical interpretations of Exodus 32-34.”\(^\text{18}\)

Note that Hafemann takes for granted that the ministry of the old covenant, the ministry that brought condemnation and death, was co-extensive with the ministry of Moses. So even though he sees Paul as upholding the glory of Moses, still in this construction Paul is drawing a *contrast* between Moses’ ministry and his own new covenant ministry. For Hafemann, although the ministry of Moses was glorious, still it was a ministry of death, or at least potentially a ministry of death, which brought with it the need for Moses to veil his face so that the people would not in fact die. One of the key suggestions of this paper, to be elaborated further below, is precisely that the ministry of the old covenant and the ministry of Moses are *not completely identical*, and rather than drawing a *contrast* between Moses’ ministry and his own ministry, Paul emphasises *points of similarity* between his new covenant ministry and the ministry of Moses in Exodus 32-34.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^\text{15}\) Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 144.


\(^\text{17}\) Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 144-149.

\(^\text{18}\) Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 148.

\(^\text{19}\) At this point we should note that Hafemann is not alone in identifying the ministry of the old covenant with the ministry of Moses and in arguing that Paul’s main point is a *contrast* between his ministry and that of Moses. In fact, it seems this is the majority view. For
Returning to Paul’s argument in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 (on the understanding that he is contrasting the ministry of the old covenant with his own new covenant ministry), Paul argues for the superiority of his new covenant ministry on the basis of its results. His new covenant ministry brought not death but the Spirit, as the evidence of the spiritual life of the Corinthians testifies. For the Corinthians to dispute that would be to doubt the reality of their own spiritual life. The old covenant came with glory, but the Israelites were unable to endure the glory because of their rebelliousness. The superiority of the new covenant lies in the fact that the glory mediated by it can be experienced by the Corinthians because of the new spiritual life that has been worked in them by the Spirit. The Corinthians can “pass the test” (13:5) because they confess Christ. Paul may have serious reservations about the way many amongst them are expressing their Christian faith, and he urges them to test and examine themselves to prove they are in the faith (13:5). But there is a new dynamic at work. The old covenant failed because of a general failure of the people. The glory of the new covenant is that it does not depend on the “success” of the people, but upon the ministry of the Spirit.

In the third step of his argument (vv 10-11), Paul argues that the glory of the old covenant has been overtaken by the glory of the new. Verse 10 reads καὶ γὰρ οὐ δεδόξασται τὸ δεδοξασμένον ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μέρει εἰνεκεν τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης δόξης, “For indeed what had glory, in this case, has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it.” This has often been interpreted to mean that the glory of the old covenant is fading away by being eclipsed by the glory of the new covenant. So Belleville understands it when she writes, “The covenant that was once glorious now scarcely appears so in the light of the splendour of the new.” Hafemann (and Scott following Hafemann) has

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example, see Linda L. Belleville, 2 Corinthians (IVP New Testament Commentary Series; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 91, 95-97. See also Barnett, 2 Corinthians, 178-188. It is of course true that Paul does assert significant overlap between the ministries of the old covenant and of Moses. For example, in 3:15 he writes of “Moses being read”, where “Moses” is shorthand for the old covenant. But this paper will argue that the ministry of the old covenant is not exhaustive of the ministry of Moses and that Moses actually exercised a ministry of life in Exodus 32-34. Furthermore, this paper will argue that Paul recognised this fact, and saw Moses’ ministry as a forerunner of his own new covenant ministry.


21 James M. Scott, 2 Corinthians (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 75.
challenged this common understanding. In Hafemann’s view, Paul does not mean that the fading glory of the old covenant is eclipsed by the greater glory of the new as the light of the moon might pale in the light of the sun. Rather, says Hafemann, Paul is arguing that the new covenant has replaced the old and is superior in its intent and purpose, not so much in its glory. Hafemann argues that it is a comparison of “divine purpose within redemptive history, not of quality or quantity.”  

He writes, “God’s glory remains God’s glory, whether revealed in connection with the law or with the gospel. It is not as if the glory of the new covenant ministry is a substance that is better, stronger or even more brilliant than the revelation of that glory in the face of Moses, as often maintained.”

In the old covenant, the veil was upon Moses’ face. But in Paul’s argument, by implication from 3:15, a veil was also upon the rebellious hearts of the Israelites. In the new covenant, the veil is removed from the heart whenever anyone turns to the Lord, which means that Paul, unlike Moses, can use great boldness of speech (3:12), for those who have come under the ministry of the new covenant can now “stand it” because of their unveiled hearts.

In 3:12-18, Paul turns very specifically to what it means to be a minister of the new covenant in comparison to the ministry of the old covenant. The reference to “boldness” (παρρησία) that Paul claims he uses in comparison to Moses’ veiling of his face is often taken to mean that Paul is claiming to be frank and open in his ministry in comparison with Moses’ wish to hide the fact that his ministry was fading away. But in the light of the discussion above, the interpretation that Hafemann and Scott present is far more likely. Paul can proclaim the message of the new covenant with boldness, because he knows that it need not be veiled, since the change that Moses experienced in his encounter with Yahweh on the mountain now has its analogy in the lives of all God’s people by the work of the Spirit under the new covenant, which brings life rather than judgment and death.

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22 Hafemann, 2 Corinthians, 152.
23 Hafemann, 2 Corinthians, 151. Hafemann’s point here unintentionally lends some support to one of the thrusts of this paper, that Paul’s new covenant ministry was in fact more like the ministry of Moses in Exodus 32-34, in contrast to the ministry of the old covenant, than is often credited.
24 So Belleville, 2 Corinthians, 102.
25 Hafemann, 2 Corinthians, 155.
26 Scott, 2 Corinthians, 77.
In other words, the superiority of Paul as a minister of the new covenant hinges not on any personal superiority of Paul over Moses, but on the contrast between the unbelieving Israelites to whom Moses had to minister, and the believers of the new covenant. The veil has been removed from their hearts (3:16), they have received liberty through the Spirit of the Lord (3:17), and they all, with unveiled faces, are continuing to be changed to increasingly reflect God’s own image (3:18). By placing the locus of the superiority of his ministry firmly within the spiritual experience of the Corinthians believers, Paul creates a strong reason for the Corinthians to be reconciled to him.

2. Paul’s Reflections on the Account in Exodus 34

Having briefly surveyed the picture of Paul’s defence of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18, we now focus on those aspects of his argument that relate to the account of Moses’ shining face in Exodus 34.

2.1. Paul’s Basic Comparison/Contrast

Paul makes two comparisons between then, Moses’ day, and now, his day. On the one hand there are people in both situations, then and now, who are cut off from God’s transforming grace. On the other hand there are people in both situations, then and now, who experience God’s transforming grace. Those who are cut off from God’s transforming grace are in Moses’ day, the Israelites whose minds were made dull, while in Paul’s day those who still read Moses with a veiled heart. Those who experience God’s transforming grace are Moses, unveiled in the Lord’s presence, experiencing the glory of God, and in Paul’s day, all who in Christ have had the veil taken away, anyone who has turned to the Lord, who has experienced the transforming ministry of the Spirit. They with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory and are being transformed by it.27 Paul emphasises the similarity between Moses and himself rather than the difference.

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27 Note the similar comparisons made by Duane A. Garrett, "Veiled Hearts: The Translation and Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3," JETS 53, no. 4 (2010): 745-747. Garrett suggests (747) that the greater glory of the new covenant “does not mean that the new covenant is somehow more dazzling than the old, as though it were a matter of a 200-watt light bulb being compared to a 15-watt light bulb. The greater ‘glory’ is the release of the power of the Spirit. It is the fact that access to the transformative grace of God, an experience that Moses alone had in Exodus 34, is now made universal.”
So Paul describes the ministry of the new covenant. Something like what Moses experienced, the glory of God that made his face shine, is now the experience of all who have been transformed by the Spirit under the new covenant through Jesus Christ. But those who still read Moses with a veiled heart, ironically, those who read even *this story* in Exodus 34 with a veiled heart, who have not turned to the Lord Jesus, still suffer the condemnation of the ministry of the old covenant.

### 2.2. The account in Exodus 34 of Moses' shining face

The first clear specific reference to the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians occurs in Chapter 3:16. The reference is to the Septuagint translation of Exodus 34:34. The two texts are as follows:

**Exodus 34:34 (LXX):** ἡνίκα δ’ ἂν εἰσεπορεύετο Μωυσῆς ἐναντὶ κυρίου λαλεῖν αὐτῷ, περιηρέται τὸ κάλυμμα (“But whenever Moses would enter into the presence of the Lord to speak to him, he would remove the veil…”)

**2 Corinthians 3:16:** ἡνίκα δὲ ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον, περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα (“But whenever he turns [the sense being ‘whenever anyone turns’] to the Lord, the veil is taken away”)

Linda Belleville provides a helpful guide to the way Paul changes some of the details of the verse in his citation:

1. He generalises the subject of the first verb. Rather than “But whenever Moses...” he makes it “but whenever anyone...”
2. He changes the action of the subject from “enter in” to “turn.”
3. In Exodus, the action was in the past: “But whenever Moses would *enter into* the presence of the Lord...” Paul makes it action in the present: “But whenever anyone *turns* to the Lord...”
4. In Exodus, Moses *removes* his own veil; in 2 Corinthians the veil is *removed.*

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29 For a useful discussion of whether this citation is simply an intentional allusion to Exodus 34 or properly treated as a quotation, and what Paul reveals about his view of the Old Testament through this citation, see Peter Balla, "2 Corinthians," in *Commentary on the*
In seeking to understand how Paul uses this text from Exodus 34, it is helpful to consider the narrative in its own context in Exodus 19-34. The particular passage, Exodus 34:29-35, is part of what happens at the foot of Mt Sinai. Israel arrives at Sinai in Exodus 19:1, and they are camped at the foot of the mountain through the rest of Exodus, right through Leviticus and on into Numbers. Finally in Numbers 10:11 they start off on their journey to the Promised Land. By this time they’ve been at Sinai for 11 months.

In Exodus 19 the LORD appears at the top of Mt Sinai and calls Moses there. He reviews his work of redemption (“I carried you on eagles wings and brought you to myself,” Exod 19:4) and calls upon his people to enter into a covenant with him so that they might be his מֵאֱלֶּֽחָיָּם “treasured possession.” Immediately, before hearing any of the terms of the envisaged relationship, the people accept the covenant and vow to keep it. Exodus 19:8 “All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָּה נַעֲשֶׁה).

The LORD then speaks the Ten Commandments and Moses receives the revelation that becomes the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 20-23. Once again the people confirm their determination to obey the LORD’s covenant stipulations. As recorded in Exodus 24:3 “Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do” (כָּל־הַדְבָּרִּים אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָּה נַעֲשֶׁה).

Again in v 7 “Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’” (כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָּה נַעֲשֶׁה וְנִּשְמָּע).

Moses then ratifies the covenant by sprinkling blood, half on the altar, and half on the people, saying, “Behold the blood of the covenant (דָּם־בְרִית), which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words (כָּל־הַדְבָּרִּים הָּאֵלֶּֽה).” The people have accepted the covenant and Moses has ratified it by sprinkling blood. What Paul calls the “old covenant” is in place. The Israelites have vowed to obey every part of it. A covenant is an agreement sealed with an oath. The

“old covenant” is the agreement that God and his people made together at Mt Sinai. God proposed the terms and gave the details of the covenant, and the Israelites agreed to do everything God demanded, and they sealed it with an oath.30

In the Exodus account, Moses goes up the mountain to get the tablets of the testimony and to receive the instructions about the tabernacle, and he is there forty days and forty nights. The people left at the base of Mt Sinai are almost immediately drawn into pagan idolatry with the golden calf.

It is striking that the narrative about the golden calf (Exodus 32-34) is central in material dealing with how the Lord can be present with his people. Barry Webb highlights the structure in the following way:31

A. 25:1-9: the presence of God foreshadowed
   B. 25:10-31:11: instructions given for making the tabernacle
      C. 31:12-17: the Sabbath
      D. 31:18: the tablets of the law
         X. 32:1-33:23 THE GOLDEN CALF; COVENANT BROKEN, BUT GOD’S GRACIOUS RESTORATION
         D’. 34:1-35: the tablets of the law
         C’. 35:1-3: the Sabbath
      B’. 35:4-40:33: Instructions carried out; the tabernacle built
   A’. 40:34-38: the presence of God realised

What is centrally located in the account emphasises the message of the account: The presence of the Lord with his people is only possible by the Lord’s grace. The central section, Exodus 32:1-33:23, has three major themes. The

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30 In effect the Israelites, in swearing to obey the stipulations of the covenant, acknowledged that if they failed to fulfil it they deserved to die. They very quickly demonstrated that they could not keep the covenant and that death is exactly what they deserved. Paul is more than justified in calling the old covenant a ministry of death.

first is the practice that most fundamentally threatens God’s presence with his people: pagan idolatry, a breaking of the first two commandments just given. But the other two themes deal with this threat to the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people, Moses’ intercession on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord’s gracious renewal of the covenant relationship that restores the possibility of his presence.

The covenant between the Lord and Israel was broken almost as soon as it was ratified. We could say that even while its stipulations were still being given the covenant was broken. The people bound themselves to keep the covenant; “all that the LORD has said we will do.” But immediately, from the very outset of the covenant relationship, Israel broke the covenant.

From the very beginning, the old covenant was what Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 calls the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of death, the ministry of the letter written on stone that kills. Paul summarises what the Old Testament teaches about life and death in relation to the old covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:6, τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτέννει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ (“for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”). Garrett nominates this statement as “the premise of Paul’s entire discussion” and “an interpretation of the OT.” “The letter kills” – there is ample evidence of that statement right through the Old Testament. “The Spirit gives life;” this statement is also based on the teaching of the Old Testament. In Genesis 1:2 the רווח אֱלֹהִים (Spirit of God) broods over the

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32 The character of the old covenant as a ministry of death raises the theological question of God’s intention with respect to the old covenant. Was the old covenant ever intended to be the way to life for Israel? This paper argues that in and of itself the old covenant was never intended to be such. Such a position would requires envisaging God as having initially a naively optimistic view of the capacity of the Israelites to obey the stipulations of the covenant, and then seeing him as ultimately realizing, from bitter experience over many centuries, that Israel simply could not obey, and that he would have to come up with an alternative plan. Such a view of God is contrary to the portrait the rest of Scripture paints. This paper argues that in fact the old covenant was never offered to Israel in and of itself, but that it always came with a call upon the Israelites to experience the internal life-giving work of the Spirit to “circumcise their hearts” such that faithful Israelites who were blessed by God in receiving a transforming work of the Spirit experienced a new God-given power to begin to obey the stipulations of the old covenant. In other words, every Israelite was called, through faith in God, to experience in some measure what would become the universal experience of all God’s people when the new covenant was ratified through the work of Jesus Christ.


lifeless waters, ready to impart life to the Creation. Job 33:4 says, “The Spirit of God (רוּחַ־אֵל) has made me, And the breath of the Almighty (נִּשְמַת שַדַי) gives me life” (NASB). In Ezekiel 37:14 God declares, “I will put my Spirit (רוּחַ) in you and you will live.” All life comes from the Spirit of God, including the origin of life in all creation, the origin of life in human beings and the origin of spiritual life that transforms people. In the Old Testament there is no source of life other than the Spirit of God.35,36

The glory of the old covenant

It is important to pay some attention to what Paul says about the glory of the old covenant. He writes consistently about it. He says in v 7 that the ministry of death came with glory; in v 9 that the ministry of condemnation has glory and in v 11 that what was fading away came with glory. Paul has been expansive on the limitations of the old covenant, and he has affirmed that the glory of the new covenant greatly surpasses that of the old covenant. His comments raise the question about the old covenant: What was its glory? Paul gives his answer in vv 13-16 as he reflects on the account of Moses’ shining face. We should go back to the account in Exodus 34 to make some further observations.

Moses descends from the mountain in 34:29, but this descent is the second of two parallel accounts, and the two accounts of his coming down in this particular way should be compared.37 His initial descent is recorded in Exodus 32:15-19. On both occasions he is carrying two stone tablets on which is written the Decalogue. Both descents follow a 40-day period of time (24:18;

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36 All this is to say the perhaps obvious but sometimes forgotten point that the old covenant is not the Old Testament. The Old Testament is God’s Word that in part tells the story of how Israel as a nation failed to keep the old covenant, even while some faithful Israelites were given grace to be (of course, not perfectly) obedient to God. These Israelites were recipients of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit even in the context of the old covenant. Daniel Block calls such people the “faithful remnant.” See Daniel I. Block, Deuteronomy (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012), 76-77.

In the first instance the people do not “know” (ידע) what has happened to Moses (32:1). In the second instance Moses does not “know” (ידע) that his face is shining (34:29). In the first instance Moses is confronted by the apostasy of the people and he destroys the stone tablets (32:19). In the second instance he meets with fear and awe, which he dispels by calling the leaders and then the people to him (34:30-32). The fear and awe are a result of Moses’ shining face. Why is his face shining? The difference between the last time he went up and every other time Moses has been in the Lord’s presence and this occasion is that the Lord has shown him his glory (34:5-7). His face was radiant וֹתּ ִּבְדַרְוֹ א (“because of his speaking with him” [that is, with the Lord]) 34:29).

The rest of Exodus 34 then explains what Moses’ regular practice becomes. When he goes in to meet with Yahweh he removes the veil. He then comes out of the tent and keeps the veil off while he communicates the Lord’s words to the people, and they would see that his face was shining. Then he would put the veil on again until the next time he would go before the Lord (34:34-35). Philpot suggests that the frequentative verbs used in 34:34-35 imply a repetition of events, suggesting that Moses face remained “glorified” from the time he came down from the mountain until his death. That may be pressing the evidence too far, but a repeated habitual action is certainly implied. How long it lasted is difficult to say. It does seem that whenever Moses was engaging in his ministry as a mediator of God’s word to Israel, at least for a period, he would remove the veil, and his face would shine, and the rest of the time he would be veiled.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul uses this account in Exodus 34 to claim that something like the experience of Moses, in being transformed by seeing the Lord’s glory, is now available to everyone who has trusted in Jesus Christ. For people who continue to reject Christ, the veil remains in place when the old covenant is read, but for Christians the veil has been removed. Paul defends his ministry by arguing that it is a ministry of the new covenant, reflecting Old Testament passages like Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul is arguing that this new covenant has come in Jesus Christ. The old covenant is the ministry of death and condemnation. In Paul’s day it still kills and condemns people who refuse Jesus Christ. But Paul is a

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minister of the new covenant in which the veil is taken away, not a ministry of death but a ministry that leads to life. To the question as to why Paul chose to defend his ministry in this way, as a contrast between the old covenant and the new, Paul Barnett has suggested that it seems likely that the so-called “super-apostles” were calling the church back to some adherence to the Law of Moses, or at the very least were making some comparison between Paul and the (in their eyes) still-glorious Moses.39

By referring to the account in Exodus 34:29-35 of Moses’ shining face, Paul acknowledges that Moses experienced some glory. But when this account is read as the conclusion to the whole account starting in Exodus 19, and in particular as the conclusion to the golden calf story in Exodus 32-34, then Paul is more than justified in labelling the old covenant as a covenant of condemnation that leads to death. Certainly it came with glory, but the glory belonged to the Lord God who gave it, and it belonged in a secondary sense to Moses, whose face shone because of his exposure to the glory of the Lord.

The glory of Moses’ shining face in Exodus 34 comes between two other manifestations of the Lord’s glory: the revelation of his glory on top of Mt Sinai in Exodus 19-20, and the coming of the glory of the Lord into the tabernacle at the end of Exodus 40. But each time it is the glory of the Lord that is displayed, and that in Moses’ case is reflected in his shining face. The glory did not belong to the old covenant itself, written on stone tablets but not on human hearts, for the old covenant in and of itself could only condemn, it could only kill. The widespread renewal of the heart and the pouring out of the Spirit awaited the coming of a new covenant in which the Lord would write his law not on stone tablets but on human hearts. Paul’s argument is that the new covenant has come through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.40

3. What Did Moses Experience in the Events Recorded in Exodus 34 and What Are the Implications for the Way We Read the Old Testament?

This final section of the paper will be somewhat experimental and ask some questions that certainly require further research. Is it possible to “reverse-

39 See Barnett, 2 Corinthians, 37-38.
40 With the implication being of course, that it would be for foolish the Corinthians to draw back from such a great salvation!
engineer” the comparison that Paul makes between his own ministry and the experience of Moses? It is true that the old covenant, carved on stone tablets, was a ministry of death. There is ample evidence of Israel’s failure to keep the covenant and so expose themselves to the necessity of their death in the account of Exodus 32-34. But the ministry of Moses himself was far from being a ministry of death. Indeed, he spends much energy and time on the mountain pleading for Israel’s life!41

In the account in Exodus 32-34, the Lord begins by telling Moses that he has seen Israel’s sin and that he has determined to destroy them and to start again with Moses (32:9-10). Moses pleads against this plan with two arguments: It will ruin God’s reputation in the world (v 12a) and it will mean that the Lord will be unfaithful to the covenant he made with “Abraham, Isaac and Israel” (v 12b-13).

The question that needs answering is, “How can the Lord live with a sinful people?” Or to put it in other terms, “How can a sinful people survive the blistering holiness of God?” In Exodus 33 the Lord proposes that Israel go up to the land. He would give it to Israel to keep his promise to the patriarchs, sending an angel ahead of them, but his presence would not go with them, for he was in danger of destroying them in a moment. The Lord declares that the only way for him to fulfil his plan of bringing Israel into the land is to refuse to be near to them; if he draws near to them he will have to destroy them. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful way of convicting Israel of their guilt, and the people mourn over the Lord’s words (33:4-6).

Moses meets with God again and requests two things of him. He asks for a reassurance of the Lord’s presence with Israel, for without it there will be nothing to distinguish Israel from any other nation (v 16). He also asks to be shown the Lord’s “glory,” that is, he wants to know God’s character and nature.42 The Lord answers both requests positively, the second one up on the mountain as he renews the covenant relationship. It is after that experience that Moses descends the mountain with his shining face. He has finished pleading for Israel’s life, the Lord has exercised his grace in acceding

41 This is another way of saying that the ministry of Moses was not entirely coterminous with the ministry of the old covenant.

to his pleading, and he has shown him his glory, and Moses’ face shines as a result.

Moses’ ministry to Israel was not a ministry of death but a ministry of life. When Paul makes a comparison between himself and Moses, he emphasises the point of similarity rather than the points of difference. Just as Paul and all who trust in Jesus Christ see the glory of God with an unveiled face, so did Moses. Moses had an experience that in some ways anticipated what God promised in the new covenant. The evidence is overwhelming that Moses had a renewed heart, a desire and an ability to obey God, a passion for his glory. Moses experienced the new life that God promises in the new covenant, but he was not able to transfer that life to anyone else. He did not have the power to pass on the glory, nor was he himself the mediator of the new covenant. The mediator of the new covenant had not yet come. Moses had a shadowy new covenant-type experience himself, but he could not pass it on. The people of Israel saw that Moses’ face shone as he communicated God’s word to them, but he could do nothing to pass that experience on.

But through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the extension of the new covenant experience to all of God’s people has come. Paul exults in his new covenant ministry because, now at last, the experience of Moses in seeing the glory of God is available to all God’s people! As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6 “For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (NASB).

Paul says that those who still read Moses with a veiled heart are cut off from the glory of God. But Paul himself does not read Moses with a veiled heart, and so he is able to properly understand what Moses wrote, including the meaning of the story of Moses’ shining face, the very story he explains here.

Some experimental questions follow. When Moses exercised his ministry of passing on the words of the Lord with his unveiled face, so that the Israelites saw that it shone, can we say that he was calling his hearers to a “new covenant” type experience? And is that the way people who belong to Christ can read Moses now that the veil has been removed from their hearts in Christ?
As an example, attention can be directed to what are some of the most famous words from the Old Testament in the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. “Hear, O Israel! (שְמַע יִּשְרָּאֵל) The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love (אהבה) the LORD your God with all your heart (לב) and with all your soul (נפש) and with all your might (ומח).”

The command to love the Lord is already anticipated right at the beginning of the covenant relationship in the Ten Commandments, specifically in the wording of the Second Commandment where God says he is one “showing lovingkindness (חסד) to thousands, to those who love (אהבה) me and keep (שמר) my commandments” (Exod 20:6). Here love of the Lord and obedience to his commands are tightly linked. In Deuteronomy Moses is explaining the meaning of the law to the second generation of Israel who are about to enter the Promised Land, and besides constantly calling upon Israel to “keep” the law of the Lord, the key note of his call is to “love” the Lord your God with every part of their being and in every aspect of life.

In commenting on this Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Daniel Block makes the following valuable point.

This passage should correct a common misunderstanding of true religion in the Old Testament. We often hear it said that whereas in ancient Israel, God demanded the sacrifices of animals and produce of the fields, in the New Testament he calls for the sacrifice of our very bodies. However, not only does this view drive an unfortunate wedge between the Testaments; it is also patently false. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 12:1-2. As is true for us, in ancient Israel the truly godly were covenantally [sic] committed to him in their inner beings, with their entire bodies, and with all their resources. Paul and Moses are on the same page.

Of course, not only can we say that Moses and Paul were on the same page, but so were Moses and Jesus. Jesus identifies the command to love the Lord

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43 The discussion as to exactly how these words are to be translated is extensive, see for example B.K. Waltke and M.P. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 8.4.2g, p 135. But the details of that discussion are not germane to this article.

44 Block, Deuteronomy, 190.
your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind as the first and greatest commandment. Along with the second great commandment, to love your neighbour as yourself, Jesus declares that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:40).

In the same Deuteronomy sermon (Deut 6-28) Moses continues to shuffle back and forth between external and internal aspects of what it means to be God’s covenant people. The internal command to “love” the Lord returns again and again, along with calls to fear him, to walk in his ways, to serve him and to hold fast to him. The external command to obey all his commands, statutes and precepts also recurs repeatedly. The internal and external aspects of living in a covenant relationship with God are tightly woven together, they cannot be separated.

But in Deuteronomy 10, Moses passes on the internal command to the Israelites in a most unusual way. He says, “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (10:16). The metaphors here interpret each other. Circumcising the heart means the opposite of stiffening the neck. The earliest reference to circumcising the heart occurs in Leviticus 26:41. In Leviticus 26 Moses is looking forward to a time after Israel has been punished for persistent rebellion, to a time when the people’s uncircumcised hearts would be humbled before the Lord. To circumcise the heart is to make the heart soft and sensitive to the Lord, and to stop resisting his will. It implies removing all barriers to true devotion to the Lord, loving him and obeying him completely.

But how can the Israelites circumcise their hearts? They cannot. It is impossible to change one’s own heart, only the Lord can do that, and in Deuteronomy, that is precisely what the Lord promises to do. In Deuteronomy 30, in the third of the three great sermons that make up the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses promises that the Lord will circumcise the hearts of Israel in the future, after all the blessing and curses he lays out in Deuteronomy have come upon Israel. It is the same future time envisaged in Leviticus 26. Deuteronomy 30:6 “Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love (הָֽאַּבֵּד) the Lord your God with all your heart (לָבֶּב) and with all your soul (נֶֶׁ֫פֶׁש), so that you may live.” In the end, loving the Lord cannot be achieved by legislation. It requires a radical new act of God. It required the heart transplant that Ezekiel and Jeremiah would speak of. Not just Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but Moses too, in
Deuteronomy 30 and even back in Leviticus 26, predicts the new covenant when God will do the mighty act of transforming the hearts of his people.

But notice that in this context of foreshadowing the new covenant, Moses does not postpone the call to love the Lord to a future day when the Lord will do his new covenant work. He applies it “this day” to his hearers in Deuteronomy. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving (אהבה) the LORD your God, by obeying (שמע) His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this [or he] is your life...” (Deut 30:19-20). Moses calls upon the people of God to live out a “new covenant” type life before him even in the context of the Old Testament.

The question at the back of the argument presented here is this: When Moses declared God’s Word to the people of Israel, he was certainly calling them to adhere to the stipulations of the old covenant. But far more, was he not also calling them to a “new covenant” type response to God? He himself was the recipient of a shadowy new covenant type experience in his unveiled encounter with the transforming grace of God, and he was calling the people to a similar commitment, empowered by an internal work of heart change.

We do not know how many Israelites in the Old Testament God chose to regenerate and make new through the work of the Holy Spirit. We do not know how many enjoyed true spiritual life, how many were enabled to love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. To express the same questions in other words, we do not know how many enjoyed a shadowy new covenant type experience during the Old Testament period.

But the question is whether we can say that the old covenant was always, at every turn, pressing on towards the need for the new covenant. The old covenant by itself was a ministry of death and condemnation. Anyone who trusted in their own ability to keep the law experienced only spiritual death. But Moses never called anyone to obey the law in their own strength, and neither did any of the prophets. The call was always to turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, and to experience his circumcision of the heart so as to be enabled to love and obey him.

**Conclusion**
If this investigation has any merit, then the following summary statements draw out some of the implications from 2 Corinthians 3 for how we read the Old Testament.

1. With Paul we are not afraid to call the old covenant a ministry of condemnation that leads only to death by itself. No one in the Old Testament era was ever right with God through obeying the law.

2. With Paul, we confess that the old covenant came with some expression of glory, the glory of the transforming power of God that has now, in these days, been made available to all who turn to Jesus Christ.

3. With Paul, we believe that Moses and all who turned to the Lord in faith in the Old Testament period had a shadowy preliminary experience of the promises of the new covenant. Those promises pointed ahead to the need for a full expression of a new covenant that God would make with his people.

4. With Paul, we read the Old Testament as the word of God which demonstrates with utmost clarity that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

5. With Paul, we exult in the fact that the new covenant has now fully come in Jesus Christ in the transforming glory of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

6. With Paul, we are concerned about those who would turn back from such a great salvation and seek to be right with God by some form of human effort.

Bibliography


